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Phyl-Undhu by Nick Land: Review

The good Mr Land has a new e-book out, *Chasm*. Buy it at once. I've not read it yet, but its publication gave me the well-needed nudge to do what I kept meaning to do, and go back and read Land's last offering, *Phyl-Undhu*, released about this time last year. Buy it at once also.

Phyl-Undhu (a friend has observed that this can be read as 'File Under') is a...I don't really know how to describe it. It's a work of experimental, conceptual horror with science fiction elements. In other words: it is *pure* Lovecraft. The characters, although substantially more fleshed out than HPL ever felt the need to do so, are largely secondary to the story and the ideas it's built around, and that's no bad thing. Horror often works best in the form of vignettes, I feel, by offering you fleeting glimpses of the Absolute Other. This isn't always the case, and character driven horror can work wonders, but there's still a certain unique chill to the short horror story, or at most horror novella. Land is using a style like that here, not taking much time to build the world, hurrying the reader into the location where he wants them, relying on hints and suggestions to create the impression of the greater substance of the story's setting. He does this very well indeed.

It follows Alison and Jack Turner's attempts to fathom the depths of their young daughter's mind and world-view, which have become so disturbing that her fellow children at school are becoming increasingly traumatised by her presence, to the extent that one student attempts suicide. They realise that Suzy, their daughter, has dramatically changed since becoming involved in a deeply immersive video game. By 'deeply' I really mean 'totally'. Land doesn't tell us anything about the tech involved (the story is clearly set in a nondescript near-future), but it seems to involve a kind of Gibson-esque VR.

The game, of which we learn reasonably little, seems to be a kind of accelerated reality simulation. Suzy's character now lives in a very, very, *very* old world, and the only glimpse we get of the scale of this simulated world is the deeply ancient conurbation that's grown around the ruins of a space elevator, 'Ashenzohn' ('Ascension', surely?). The horror of *Phyl-Undhu* really lies in this. The game is heavily implied to be a solution to science non-fiction's most frightening monster: The Great Filter.

The Great Filter is a proposed solution to the Fermi Paradox, which can be summarised as follows - the Universe is very big and very old, thus life should be common enough to be noticeable throughout: so, where are the aliens? Why haven't we spotted evidence of at least *one* interstellar civilisation yet? The Great Filter may be the answer to that question. The Great Filter is an unknown force that radically reduces the probability of life creating an interstellar civilisation. It may apply at an early stage (i.e. whatever the Filter is, it may simply reduce the chance of life occurring in the first place, or of multi-cellular life occurring, or of intelligence occurring, and so on) or it may apply later (reducing the chance of agricultural civilisation, or of technological civilisation, or of space-faring civilisation, and so on). If the Filter is early, then we're probably ok: we passed it long ago. If it's late, then there's a greater chance that we still have it ahead of us. Maybe technological civilisations just don't tend to last long enough to become space-faring...

So what might the late-Filter be? *Phyl-Undhu* suggest a possibility. Technological civilisations may tend to become lost in their own simulated realities, finding them preferable to *actual* reality. There's any number of reasons this might be, including just standard 'decadence' or, more curiously, the notion that simulated reality contains more potential for discovery and ultimately value than 'natural' reality, especially if it turns out that interstellar travel is prohibitively difficult (i.e. no warp drives. Ever.). Land has speculated about time in many places, especially the idea that advanced technology can radically alter our perception of time: cyber-time making mockery of mere 'meat-time'. A simulated reality where a second of outside time can be minutes, or more, of internal time. The further down this rabbit hole we go, the less likely it is we can emerge...potential lifetime-upon-lifetime of rich, unpredictable experiences lying within the

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Matrix...why bother going somewhere as dull as Mars when you can enjoy oceans and oceans of simulated worlds?

I'm not going to describe the content of the simulation in too much detail, simply because you really ought to read this for yourself, but suffice to say that if you know what you're looking for in it, there's certain a shroud of Dark Enlightenment cast over it, giving it all a deliciously gloomy sheen.

Although, as it often the case with Land's fiction, it falls into the trap at points of being a little *too* cryptic, for the vast majority of the time the strangeness of it all feels more like a puzzle than something that's simply opaque for it's own sake, and it rewards a second reading. It also contains some cool articles previously published on Xenosystems, and perhaps most bizarrely, an oddly loving, unauthorised cameo from Scott Alexander (Scott didn't know about this until after the fact, though wasn't exactly displeased).

All in all, as ever, Nick Land is worth your time reading, regardless of what you may think about his views. It makes me wish he'd spend more time on this kind of cool, clever, experimental fiction than he does, and I'm very much looking forward to digging into *Chasm* over the Christmas holiday.

Land's publisher is Time Spiral Press, and if you want something even more esoteric than this, check out *Ccru: Writings 1997-2003*, which I've been thumbing through for the last few months.

Stay tuned for my thoughts on *Chasm* in the (hopefully near) future.

Posted by Unknown at 20:58

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